In Tunefoolery

TUNEOOPLERY, from page 1 was simple — to use music as an outlet for their creativity. What Thompson didn't fully realize was that Tunefoolery would grow to 50 members, and provide that much-needed feeling of hope to others suffering from psychiatric disorders. (Thompson prefers the term "psychiatric disorder" to "mental illness" because of the stigma that comes with the latter.)

"With Tunefoolery, as opposed to focusing on the negative, it focuses on our strengths and talents," explains Thompson. "I've seen a lot of people fall through the cracks and into despair with no light at the end of the tunnel. When people have something to look forward to, it gives them a positive perspective."

And that "something" to look forward to may be a rehearsal, a gig, or a CD release party for the group's second album, titled "Tunefoolery II," on May 18 at the YMCA Theatre in Cambridge.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 26.2 percent of Americans (18 years or older) suffer from a psychiatric disorder and for the majority of them, the treatment for the illness is pills and therapy. That makes Tunefoolery's success so much more important and impressive. Not only does it help patients achieve a positive outlook, but it accomplished that goal on a meager budget of $75,000 a year. Expenses include the staff workers at the Cambridge-Somerville Social Club, transportation for the musicians and the $50 musicians get for a gig. "We pay them because we want them to know we value their work," explains artistic director Jens Rybo. "Even with programs, foundations and various grants, we still struggle to make ends meet."

Rybo has been involved in the mental health field for 15 years and has been involved with Tunefoolery since the beginning (he began as a counselor at the social club). He's seen people with bipolar disorder and major depression, illnesses, some so extreme that the people afflicted couldn't work. But since Tunefoolery, Rybo has witnessed a stark difference.

"Wherever we perform, we've always had a positive response," says Rybo. "That's part of the mission. By going out and performing, we're helping people change their view of mental illness."

As part of the organization's education outreach program, members of the social club go to schools to talk about mental illness. Rybo says they usually start with a list of successful and creative people you wouldn't think had mental illnesses, like Abraham Lincoln and Janet Jackson.

Tunefoolery has its own success stories. One woman benefited so much from the musical therapy that she is now a piano teacher who composes her own music. And yet, with so much evidence of the health and emotional benefits that Tunefoolery yields, it's still a rare form of therapy in the mental health industry. "It is a pretty unusual idea," admits Rybo. "Other mental health institutions are part of the public mental health system and there's very little money there."

In fact, Rybo says that if Tunefoolery solely relied on state funds, the group would cease to exist. "It is a pretty unusual idea," admits Rybo. "Other mental health institutions are part of the public mental health system and there's very little money there."

In my opinion, state funding to the public mental health institutions isn't where it should be," says Rybo. "People are suffering from a mental illness, the worst part is the isolation. With Tunefoolery, we've created a community and a place where people can share their struggles and experiences through music."

Francis Ma can be reached at fnai@onclick.com.